

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 234

We all know that the object of our meeting together is to bring to memory certain things, to brush up again the picture that has been drawn upon our minds by knowledge. It is of very great importance that we do this, for the things we have learnt—things past and things to come—are true, and will work themselves out whether we remember them or not; but they will not work themselves out beneficially for us if we forget them or cease to be influenced by them. The truth of them does not depend upon our memory, but their value to us does so, as Paul said to the Corinthians that the gospel would save them “*if ye keep in memory the things that I delivered unto you.*” It is well to realise distinctly that the truth is true independently of us. We all know this to be the fact, but we do not at all times feel the force of it. We are so liable to think that the truth is a little more true when we happen to remember it, or not so important when we let it dull out of our memory. A little mental exercise will help to dispel this illusion. If we look in at any stage of enacted history, say the times of Elizabeth, or the irruption of the Danes and Saxons into England, or the Roman invasion of Britain under Julius Caesar, or the overthrow of the Jewish state and the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, or the wars of Alexander against the Persians, or the doings of the Greek republics in arms and letters, we have to think that these things were transacted without us in any sense or way. We were nowhere: we had no knowledge of them, yet they went on and enacted themselves, and would remain enacted realities if we had never been born.

It is so with those other matters that the Bible has made known to us, with this difference, that out of Bible history arises a Bible futurity that will enact itself whether we believe it or not. Bible history and Bible prophecy cannot be separated. Prophecy is mostly glorious, but there are dark features. The things to come, of which Christ is the centre, are both good and evil. The truth has two sides—salvation and condemnation; —acceptance and rejection; great joy and great anguish. We are in the habit of mostly looking at the beautiful side; it is well occasionally to look at the other. We have got rid of the popular hell, and we are liable to go to the other extreme and to forget that—

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Comparatively little—perhaps too little—is said of judgment to come in our lecturing up and down the country. Judgment to come is a terrible reality. As Paul reasoned with Felix on the subject, it made him tremble (Acts 24:25). Paul made it a point to give prominence to it in his teaching. He said,

“Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor. 5:11).

He declared that it is part of the testimony of the gospel that God will inflict “*indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first and also of the Gentile*”

(Rom. 2:8-9, 16).

Jesus gives to the subject of judgment to come a fiery prominence in the chapter read this morning (Mark 9),

“It is better for thee to enter into life maimed than having two hands to go into Gehenna into the fire that never shall be quenched, where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life than having two feet to be cast into Gehenna, in the fire that never will be quenched, where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the Kingdom of God with one eye than having two eyes to be cast into Gehenna fire, where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched.”

Let us ponder this a moment. Let us endeavour to realise it. Eternal torments would be dreadful, but for the time being, the sufferings of those who are the subjects of the punishment to which Jesus refers will be as terrible. Jesus associates them in another place with *“weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.”* God is kind and of long-suffering, but He has another side.

“Our God is a consuming fire.”

God is love, and His tender mercy is over all His works: and yet Paul invites us to *“behold His severity”* in certain relations (Rom. 11:22). The history of His transaction with men is full of illustrations on this point. The flood is a standing instance to which Jesus more than once refers. An irruption of merciless waters drowned the whole population—nice babies, pretty children, beautiful girls, stalwart fine-looking men, and old men of grey and venerable aspect. What was the cause of the terrible visitation?

“Because all flesh had corrupted His way, and the earth was filled with violence.”

Men thought it a light thing to corrupt the way of God. They were not afraid to disregard His appointments; they thought it a weak and womanish thing to fear to do wrong just exactly as it is now, as Jesus said would be the case. After a time of long-suffering and expostulation, destruction swept them all away, and so it will be again, except that the destruction will not be of so sweeping a character, as the times and circumstances are different. The judgment to be inflicted on the world’s population at the coming of Christ is to subdue and enlighten them, and bring them into harmony with God for the glory of God and His people in the kingdom to be set up. Yet as regards vast masses of mankind, it will be as thorough a perdition as that which overtook the contemporaries of Noah. Sodom overwhelmed in the most direful destruction is another instance; so also with the plaguing of the Egyptians, the slaughter of the Canaanites, the affliction of Israel in various ways till the piled-up wrath of God descended upon the unhappy nation in an avalanche of destruction at the hands of the Romans.

These are illustrations in the past from which we may learn something for the future. The Scriptures inform us that the anger of God will burst in an aggravated form upon the heads of rebellious mankind in the latter days.

*“The whirlwind of the Lord is gone forth with fury, a continuing whirlwind: it shall fall with pain upon the head of the wicked. The fierce anger of the Lord will not return until he have done it, and until he have performed the intents of his heart: **in the latter days ye shall consider it.**”*

Of these days, it is written both in Daniel and the Apocalypse that they will exceed in stress of evil all the previous experiences of mankind:

“A time of trouble such as never was.”

Such a time happened to Israel; such a time will befall the Gentiles. People to the last moment have a kind of feeling that their affairs are secure. It does not occur to them to think how easy, humanly speaking, it is for God to bring evil upon them. Look at London, with her four or five millions of people. What an enormous quantity of food is required for the daily victualling of such a community: where would they be in the event of that supply being cut off, either by failure of seasons, or the fortunes of war? Or look at Britain as a whole, with her 35,000,000 of population and producing only about a third of the food required by the inhabitants of the island: where should we be if our fleets happened to be overpowered and the supply of food from other countries were cut off? But what need of multiplying illustrations! We are helplessly in the hand of God. *“Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his refuge,”* and helpless is he that hath God for his enemy.

In the tempest of trouble that will overwhelm the world at last in its conflict with Christ arrived, no sufferers will be so hapless as those whom Christ rejects in judgment, and

sends away into the lands and troubles of his enemies. Let us try and catch a glimpse of the lurid terror of the time; they are not fantasies, but words of truth and soberness, however much derided by men in these the days of their security. Suppose that our meeting this morning was not a meeting for the breaking of bread, and calling Christ to memory in peace, but a meeting for him to separate the sheep from the goats, and to say to the goats—

“Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.”

We will not cumber ourselves with the orthodox conception. We will deal only with that which we know to be according to truth. With no Miltonic monster or Dantesque deeps of fire have we to deal, yet with something unutterably awful. The devil and his angels is the Bible synonym for the organised hostility of man to God at the coming of Christ—the Kingdoms of the world arrayed against him—and waiting in sultry suspense for the shock of *“the war of that great day of God Almighty,”* in which the ripe fruit-bunches of human wickedness are thrown into the wine-press of wrath of God, and trodden in anger with the resultant streams of human gore. Consider what is meant by being sent away among them instead of remaining in the security of Christ’s protecting presence. In ordinary circumstances, we have always a reserve thought that eases off our worst troubles—a velvet cushion of some kind that breaks the shock. We have at least our own home left, our own friends, our own liberty, our books to read for comfort, our walks abroad to ease our agonies—the blue sky, the fresh air, the smiling landscape. We can at all events take refuge in slumber’s pillow at night—which is all very true and helpful, but will no longer be true if we are dismissed with the terrible words,

“Depart from me ye cursed.”

There is no resource of comfort or easement left then. The unhappy part of the rejected is to be driven out among the Lord’s enemies who are themselves afflicted as in a lake of fire, to suffer they know what for and with what end. If you are among them you arrive as a vagabond, without house, without friend, without calling, without hope. There have been days of peace and privilege and health, but they are gone now. Wrath heaped up against the day of wrath has caught you in its whirlpool blast. The righteous judgment of God envelopes you in *“tribulation and anguish.”* You have had pains and toothaches and torments: they are gathered on you now tenfold, without access to remedy and without the power to end your misery, for you are in the hands of God, whose slighted mercy and unappreciated greatness and discarded rights and claims now rise up against you, and smite you with scorpion torments. You know the truth of the words,

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

“Be not deceived: God is not mocked.”

Your horizon has no light: your black sky is without a break. You know the only end is in second death, in destroying fire, which will wipe your dishonoured memory from under the heavens. It is not eternal torments, but it is as bad while it lasts. We ought to look it in the face as a possibility to be averted. Christ’s words imply this. The contemplation of it will help us to estimate their wisdom and the force. It is better to enter into life halt or maimed than having perfect members to go into the fire that no man can quench. He does not mean that men will enter into life without an eye, or a foot or a hand; for the resurrection body will be perfect. He means it would be better were such a thing possible. It is one of his parables, to the use of which he was prone. His meaning is evident, namely, that it is far better to forego any advantage or any pleasure, or even any privilege that will imperil our fitness for the Kingdom of God, than to preserve our perfect satisfactions now on all points and discover at last that we have indulged them at the expense of our calling and election. If we do not see this now, we shall certainly see it then, too late—when all the things we have tried to secure

are gone from our grasp for ever—when it will be said to us as to Great Babylon of that same crisis:

“The fruits that thy soul lusted after are departed from thee”; “Thou shalt be found no more at all.”

Especially grievous will rejection be when the rejected see what they have lost—see it with their eyes as a shining and glorious reality. What this is, we have a peep at in the other part of the chapter from Mark, in the account of the transfiguration. See what the power of the Spirit of God can do. Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, unglorified ascends a hill with three of his disciples. His mortal face shines as with the burnished light of the sun; his common clothes glisten with a snowy whiteness of glory beyond the utmost power of human art to imitate. Moses and Elias appear with him in glory, and they confer familiarity together. Here was an exhibition in advance of the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. It was a miniature illustration of what is meant by the glory to be revealed. What was done on the small scale then will be done to all the elect of God at the time when the rejected will depart from the presence of the Lord *“with weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.”* The shall the righteous—(the class who have figuratively cut off their right hands and pulled out their right eyes that they might enter the kingdom rather than preserve all intact for wholesale consumption with the wicked)—*“then shall the righteous shine forth in the kingdom of their Father,”* so says Jesus, who also said,

“Ye shall see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, and ye yourselves shall be thrust out.”

This is equivalent to saying that the rejected in the day of their anguish will have that anguish intensified by the spectacle of the glorified multitude that no man can number rejoicing in the salvation from which they themselves are excluded. There they are: a shining noble throng: you were once among them: now you are no longer of their number: you are cast out as unworthy of a place. What have you gained by your snug and successful management by which your offending eye hand and foot have all been preserved in such healthy vigour? What can the bowing and smiling friends whom you propitiated at the cost of faithfulness to the lord do for you now? What can your property that you prudently conserved for personal uses wholly, avail you now? Of what good to you now is the respectability you carefully cultivated with a God-despising generation—men of the world who have their portion in this life? All have perished from your hands. They are but fuel now for the everlasting fire that waits to devour. God takes no pleasure in you. The holy son of His love, now the manifested judge, dismisses you with calm judicial firmness. Long-suffering has come to an end. The day of unrecognised grace has become the day of insistent judgment that cannot be evaded or put off; and you behold the glory you have missed—the splendid gift of incorruption, the shining honour of a place among God’s ennobled friends, the priceless treasure of a crown of glory that fadeth not away, “Hark! Those bursts of acclamation,” your voice contributes no ingredient to the enraptured song. Listen to the wail of a terror-stricken multitude as they depart with weeping and gnashing of teeth: you swell the shrieks that rend the sky. You will find no comfort from your fellow-shriekers. Sinners can do something for you now: they can do nothing then: their day is done: judgment has arrived: in the scathing fires of which they curse each other and curse the infatuation that blinded them in the day of their opportunity to heaven’s beautiful light. They will then remember the still small voice of the Son of Man that speaks unheeded now.

“If thy hand offend thee, cut it off. It is better for thee to enter into life halt and maimed than having two hands to enter into the fire of Gehenna that never shall be quenched.”

It is better to remember it now. It is better to act on it now. It may be difficult: it may be hard: it may often be heart-breaking: but its deepest sorrow is nothing to the *“wrath of heaven*

revealed against all unrighteousness of men” when “the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The sorrows and self-denials and the burdens of the present course of faith and obedience will all be made up to us a thousandfold in the words of sympathetic welcome that wait the approved, “Well done, good and faithful servant, you had a hard struggle: a difficult fight: but you have got through victoriously. You made the most of the very little that was in your power: enter now into the great and high and pleasant ways of everlasting rest.”

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